WASHINGTON POST
8 March 1987

My Hostage Life in Beirut Was Waiting and Praying

By David P. Jacobsen and Ray Perez

OUR FIRST ROOM was about the size of the living room of a two-bedroom apartment. I was kept blindfolded, but I could tell there were other hostages. I could hear them being asked, "Are you hungry?" When I was taken to the toilet, I had to step over their bedding.

I was chained and put to the floor and told to remain silent. My clothes had been taken from me during interrogation, so I just had my underwear and a cotton tablecloth that served as a blanket. I was able to turn and to do push-ups and even leg lifts. I couldn't do sit-ups, but sometimes after I was taken to the toilet, I'd say, "Hey, I need some exercise," and would jog in place for a couple of minutes.

After five weeks, I was taken to another room, this one about 12 feet wide. After the door was locked I lifted my blindfold to see where I was. A guy was sitting in the other corner, peeking through his blindfold. It was Terry Anderson.

We were alone for a month, and during the day, when the door was locked, we chatted very quietly. Anderson had 74 days' seniority on me as a prisoner and had picked up a little information. We knew there were Americans next door, and Anderson, who had reported on their kidnapings for the Associated Press, had guessed that they were Fr. Lawrence Martin Jenco and the Rev. Benjamin Weir.

The guards brought us a Bible, but I didn't have glasses, so everything was just a fuzz. Anderson had his glasses, but they were broken. Even so, he would read the Bible to me an hour a day when we were permitted to have it.

Our third room brought us all together. We were moved there in July 1985, when the shelling in Beirut got too close. Waiting for us was Tom Sutherland.

So the five of us were finally together, and each of us had a chaise-longue pad. The room was just big enough to fit four pads abreast, with one at the foot. Each day, we were allowed to go to the toilet one by one. We had 15 minutes to take a shower, wash our clothes, empty our urinals, get fresh water and clean our plastic bowls, spoons and cups. The guards got very unhappy if it was 16 minutes, because there were five of us, and the whole procedure took up at least an hour and 15 minutes of their time.

We were not permitted to see our captors. We had instructions to put on our blindfolds whenever they came in the room.

But they weren't pulling out our fingernails. They weren't breaking our bones. They weren't torturing us. We were just kept like rabbits in a cage. We lost all of our freedoms except two: the freedom to think and the freedom to pray.

The first time Anderson and I saw the sun was when we were taken to a window and permitted to look out for a few minutes. I saw bottle-brush trees and eucalyptuses and was reminded of California. There was a little breeze. Later, we were taken outside to exercise in an enclosed patio, but we were blindfolded most of that time.

Still later, we were kidding the guards: "Is there still a moon, are there still stars out there?" It had its effect. They got permission to take us outside, one at a time, on a beautiful evening. When it was my turn, one of the militias had fired a flare that lit up the sky. A purple ball of light was slowly coming down, and I could see the mountains of Lebanon. There were stars and the moon. It was like a religious experience.

We came to rely on one another for emotional and psychological support as the days stretched into weeks, and then months. Like all of us, I suppose, I never thought I'd be in as long as I was. In fact, I thought I'd be getting out within the first month, in time to return to Huntington Beach for my son Paul's wedding. As it turned out, I spent that day chained to the floor.

To help myself through the hours, I spun an elaborate fantasy. I pretended I was with my family, getting ready to go to the wedding. In my mind I went to St. Bonaventure's Church on Springdale Street and saw my future daughter-in-law coming in. In my mind I drove down to the Huntington Harbour Club for the reception. I spent the whole day lost in my fantasy of what was happening thousands of miles away. I did the same thing on my son Eric's birthday, July 3. And on my dad's birthday, July 9, I mentally drove up to see him and spent some time. Always, I tried to think of the good things in my life, the people I loved.

Fr. Jenco and I played a game to keep ourselves going. At the beginning of a week, we'd agree that we were certain to be released that Saturday night. When it got to be Saturday night and we weren't released, we'd snap our fingers and say: "We goofed. It's not this Saturday, it's next Saturday." It gave us a little hope each week that the next weekend would be our last locked up.

Every morning we'd put our pads against the wall and do stretching exercises. Then we'd walk. We'd walk around and around, lost in our thoughts. Anderson made sets of beads by tying knots in string he pulled out of the plastic mat on the floor, and I think that he and Fr. Jenco used the beads to say the Rosary. I love musicals, so every day I'd sing a Broadway musical to myself— from "Evita" all the way back to "Oklahoma!"

We all had a good sense of humor, and one day we jokingly decided to put together a hostage kit that every American should carry in case they were kidnaped overseas. All of us literally had tears running down our cheeks from laughter.

As the rookie hostage, Tom Sutherland bore the brunt of most of our jokes. But Sutherland is a great teacher, and he made life bearable by instructing us in genetics and agro-economics. We also had church services, two a day. Ben Weir, a Presbyterian minister, conducted one, and Fr. Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest, the other. We named our church the Church of the Locked Door.

The people who held me are Lebanese. They are not Syrians, they are not Iranians, they are not Iraqis, they are not Egyptians, and they are not Libyans. They are Lebanese and they are Shia Muslims. They take orders from no one.

They honestly didn't realize the harm they were doing to our lives. "We've been good to you. We've taken good care of you. We haven't hurt you," they told us. They were just four young Muslim kids earning $25 to $50 a month to support their families. It was a job to them.

The squad leader could be very calm, but he was a volcano ready to explode. He was short—a little kid—and he wore these little tennis shoes. He used to make good Arabic coffee for us.

When Anderson and I were together, the leader of our captors—named Haj—once philosophized with us (through an interpreter) about liberty, peace, justice and democracy. He was upset because the U.S. government would not talk with him about his group's demand for the release of 17 Muslims held in Kuwait.

"Nobody will talk. We want to solve this," he said. So we suggested that he release one of us. "One way you can do it, Haj, is just let us go," we said. "We'll tell them."

When the five of us were together, Haj came in again and asked, "Is there anything you want?" We asked for a transistor radio, and he sent it. We were supposed to have it all the time, but the guards only gave it to us twice a day for about an hour. We would pick up the Voice of America, the BBC and the local English-language station, and Ben Weir translated some Arabic.

Haj came back again after we had been moved to the third room. "You know, we're going to let one of you go," he said. "You decide who it should be." We did, but Haj rejected our recommendation. (Until the others are released, I don't want to say who that was.) Instead, he spoke to Ben Weir in Arabic. Weir got very upset and kept saying, "Oh, no, no. Oh, no, no."

Weir was told that he would be released, even though he felt that others should go instead. On Sept. 14, 1985, he left. It gave Anderson and me some hope. "Well, you know, Haj is reasonable," we said. "We told him to let somebody go, and he did."

I know more about Terry Anderson, and he knows more about me, I think, than any other human being. Anderson is an extremely liberal Democrat; I am a conservative Republican. Anderson is a journalist who believes that everyone has a right to know; I'm a hospital administrator and believe firmly in the rights of privacy. I enjoy sports; Anderson couldn't care less about athletics. We differed on virtually everything—from philosophy to foreign policy—and we'd get into tremendous arguments. But he is still my brother and I still care for the man. On the outside, as free men, I don't think either of us would have selected the other as a friend. But there's a bond that overcomes our differences.

One night, we heard former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger on the radio. He said: "Well, there are several things I could advise the president to secure the release of the American hostages, but in the last resort they are going to have to use their own resources to get out."

I was sitting in my underwear on a pad. The room had no windows. There was a double lock on the door. An armed guard was outside the door, and another armed guard was watching him down the hall. I said: "My God, Henry, what resources do I have? What resources do you think I have?" The others reacted the same way. Other than the day I was kidnaped, that was the low point.

When Weir was released, we had some optimism. It will be difficult to convince me that Anderson's and my hours of philosophizing with Haj did not play a major role in Weir's release. Anderson and I did that. We also had hints from the guards that Terry Waite, who had been sent to Lebanon by the archbishop of Canterbury, was making progress.

Surprisingly, the four of us—Fr. Jenco, Terry Anderson, Tom Sutherland and I—didn't just collapse when Waite's negotiations fell through. We merely shrugged our shoulders. We never once lost faith that we were going to be free. Never once.

Ten months later, on July 26, 1986, Fr. Jenco was freed. I rejoiced for him, but his release became the catalyst for a series of events that brought some of my darkest days in captivity.

With this release, there was no discussion. Our captors just came in and made us think we were all leaving. "You have to be quiet. Get ready," they said. "You'll go out one at a time into the bus." We assumed that they were taking us to a Red Cross exchange. In fact, they had brought us each shoes, trousers and a shirt. "You're all going to go, so if you have a beard, shave it off," they said. "If you don't have a beard, grow one." They didn't want us to be identified leaving the building.

I went first. But I wasn't taken out of the building; I was simply marched into another room. Then Anderson and Sutherland came in, and I knew Fr. Jenco was going home.

I was taken out of the room and asked to make a videotape that would be released to Lebanese television. Anderson and Sutherland learned that Fr. Jenco had been released when they heard me say it while I was making the tape. They were blindfolded, sitting in the same room against the wall.

Some days later, we were allowed to see my tape as it had appeared on TV. The clip included footage of Fr. Jenco after he had reached Syria. As I spoke, lettering flashed on the screen. Jacobsen, it said, apparently was trying to send a coded message when he made the tape. I thought, "Oh, boy, trouble's coming."

The guards were very unhappy. They yelled and screamed and threatened. I was angry with the news media's irresponsible speculation. So was Terry Anderson.

One day in September, one of the Shias who spoke English said to me, "I want you to write a letter," which they would use to pressure the Reagan administration to negotiate. He gave me an outline of points I was to cover, and I wrote it. In it, I complained that the administration was working to free U.S. journalist Nicholas Daniloff from the Soviet Union but was ignoring our plight. The Shia was back within an hour. He said: "It's no good. We don't trust you. We are going to rewrite it. You are going to write it down exactly as dictated. You are going to spell it like we tell you. You are going to punctuate it like we tell you."

I did as they said. One of them checked it word for word, sentence for sentence. It was exactly as they dictated, but I warned them that the outside world would know the words weren't mine.

Sure enough, when the letter made its way into print, the news media circled all the grammatical mistakes, and my captors accused me of deliberately inserting them. They were angry because they thought I had sent out another coded message and embarrassed them before the entire Arab world.

So they took me to another room and beat my feet with a rubber hose. They were giving me a pretty good working over. I thought, "They are just going to do more until they get some emotion out of me," I didn't want them to think I was a G. Gordon Liddy type, so I started to say, "Ouch, it hurts," and "Hey, stop it" and "Why are you doing this?"

Eventually they stopped. I was put in isolation on Sept. 19, 1986, in a little room six feet square. It was dark except for light coming through the transom. I did a tremendous amount of exercise.

When I awoke early one morning in October, I had the overpowering feeling that I was going to be released. It wasn't a dream—just a tremendous, powerful feeling that I was going to get out on Saturday, Nov. 1, or Sunday, Nov. 2, 1986. It was so powerful that when I went to bed on Saturday night, I knew that I was going to be going home in several hours.

I had just fallen asleep when I heard a noise in the guards' room, followed by the shuffling of feet. A stranger came in my room and said, "Mr. David, we're happy you're going home. You'll be going home in a couple of hours. But first we have to move everyone." They were always concerned that their location—and their identities—would be discovered. They think the United States has photographs of them all, that there is a CIA agent lurking behind every Shia.

I had always known that the day of my release would be the most dangerous time of my captivity, because I would be exposed in a very violent city. There is metal in the air in Beirut. There are stray bullets. I could fall right in the middle of a gun battle or be kidnaped again upon release.

I was released in the area of the old, bombed-out American Embassy in West Beirut, which is not occupied except by a security force. I walked too far, overshooting the embassy by about 200 meters. One of the Shias tapped me on the shoulder and told me that I'd walked too far, to turn and walk back. For a moment I thought, "Oh no, I'm being kidnaped again."

That was a day of emotion, a day of excitement. After 17 months, I finally was walking along the corniche, seeing that gorgeous Mediterranean and smelling that air, seeing the ships at sea and the people jogging along the street or drinking coffee at the cafes.

I was happy, but I wasn't doing cartwheels. I'm still in chains until Sutherland and Anderson are out. I don't have nightmares now. I sleep well and exercise hard. I lead a constructive life. But those guys are still heavy on my mind, and I can't forget their situation. It was my situation for 17 months, and I pray that it won't be theirs much longer.

Ray Perez, a Los Angeles Times staff writer, covered David Jacobsen's family during his captivity. This article was distributed by Los Angeles Times Syndicate.